

The Christian And Romans 7

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How would you feel if the Bible taught that you could never rise higher in your spiritual life than the man in Romans 7? Would you shout "Praise the Lord" or would you flounder in the "Slough of Despond"? Let us together be challenged to understand Romans 7 as we believe Paul intended for it to be understood.

Chapter 6 is recognized as the new birth passage of Romans, echoing chapter 5. "How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" (Romans 6:2). Romans 6:1-11 explains the process of the new birth, and 6:12-23 describes the new life. Repeatedly, we are said to have died with Christ and to sin. Four times we are said to be risen with Christ, or to be alive unto God. And three times in Romans 6 we are said to be free from sin.

"Our old man is [was-Greek] crucified with him ... " (v. 6). Christ died on the cross. So did our old man, but the flesh remains. Ephesians 4:22 and Colossians 3:9 says in the past tense in the Greek, "Having put off the old man with his deeds: ... having put on the new ... " These three passages are all in the past tense, describing a part of the new birth experience. "Planted together in the likeness of his death . . ." is also in the past tense (Romans 6:5), having occurred in the past.

Verses 10, 11 ascribe to us the same experience of dying unto sin and living unto God as they do to Christ, identifying us with Him in both. God has made provision to keep us from sin. God intends that we shall not sin, for sin is never a necessity, and its power is broken. "Sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14).

Romans 6:14 stands in contrast to Romans 7. Paul reminds his readers that they are now ashamed of their former life in the flesh (Romans 6:21). They are to "yield [their] members servants to righteousness unto holiness" (6:19). "But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life" (6:22). The three references in the New Testament to the old man's existence refer to the past. The old man is not to be operative in the

present.

According to a strict following of the rules of grammar, Romans 7 would have to be understood as Paul's own experience, for he speaks only in the first person, singular, in the present tense, and in positive terms. But according to the truth of the New Testament Scriptures, this passage cannot be understood as Paul's own experience after his conversion and at the time he wrote it. This would controvert everything he wrote about his own sanctification and that of others "in Christ," and all the teachings on holiness in the New Testament.

How do the Scriptures resolve an apparent grammatical and theological paradox? Romans 7 is developed around three questions. (1) "Know ye not . . . that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth?" (v, 1). This is discussed and answered in verses 1-6. (2) "Is the law sin?" (v. 7) This is discussed and answered in verses 7-12. (3). "Was then that which is good made death unto me?" (v, 13)? This is discussed and answered in verses 13-25.

In the first six verses Paul shows by analogy how we are delivered from the dominion of the law, and that we should now walk "in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter." This is the answer to the question in verse one.

This answer provokes the second question regarding the law's sanctity. "Is the law sin?" Far from being sin, the law showed sinful man his sin. For he was not conscious of lust until the law said, "Thou shalt not covet." Paul was alive "without the law once," possibly in his innocence. But as he became accountable, the law charged him with sin. "Sin revived, and I died." Yet he was physically alive to tell it. He must have meant spiritual death. Every commandment in God's law is for man's benefit, and has a penalty attached for its violation. Paul broke the law and found the commandment to be unto death, and concludes, "... the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good."

But why didn't Paul prove from the Old Testament that the law is holy? Why did he not say that God wrote the Ten Commandments on two tables of stone with His own fingers? Instead, he gave a wholly subjective explanation of the effect of the law on himself to show that the law is holy. Now, if the law worked like this for Paul only, and not for others, what value would it be to report it in the New Testament? Didn't he ask "Is the

law sin?" Was he not answering that question in verses 7 to 12? Then clearly, the law is the subject of this passage, and not Paul. Paul is simply the object of the law's working to demonstrate the effect of the law on a man. And this served to vindicate the law.

At no place in Romans does it appear to be Paul's intention to give his own personal experience. His purpose was to make principles of truth visible. It is not possible to prove the relevance of a universal premise by adducing as evidence the experience of one man, unless it is intended to be understood that this one man's experience is representative of all men.

Edward Robinson's Greek-English Lexicon views the experience of the man in Roman 7 as being representative of all men.

"Nom. ego, Plur. emeis ... Used sometimes by Paul koinonikos, i.e., where the speaker puts himself as the representative of all, or vice versa; e.g. ego for emeis, Rom. 7:9, 10, 14, 17,20 bis. 24. 25. I Cor. 10:30, comp. 13:1 sq. Oremeis forego, I Cor. 1:23; 2:10."¹ In English, ego is I, and emeis is we. Out of 6 lexicons, Robinson is the only one who gives this explanation. If this is correct, and it certainly makes sense, then this may be the key to understanding Paul's first person, present tense language in verses 14 to 25, and therefore to understanding the message of Romans 7.

In chapter 6 God is mentioned 6 times, and Christ 15 times. The Holy Spirit is not mentioned, but implied. We are "alive unto God" only by the Spirit of Christ in us.

Sin is personified throughout chapter 7 and appears 14 times. Six times it meant death to Paul. "Law" appears 16 times and "commandment" nine times, totaling 25 times, for law is the subject of the chapter. "I" is used 29 times; "me" 11 times; and "my" three times totaling 43 first person singular pronouns in 19 verses. There is no other such passage in the Bible. God is named four times, Christ once, and the Holy Spirit not at all. The content of Romans 7 is law, I, sin, and death.

On the other hand, in chapter 8 God is mentioned 28 times, Christ, 19 times, and the Holy Spirit 19 times. This alone demonstrates the contrast in the contents of these chapters.

"Was then that which is good made death unto me?" The first question, in

verse 1, is in the present tense, and answered in the present tense. The question in verse 7 is in the present tense and answered in the past tense. But the question in verse 13 is asked in the past tense and answered in the present tense. Why?

God's moral law spoken of in these three chapters is eternal. Paul tells us that we have been delivered from the dominion of sin, but not from the precepts of the law. "For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace" (6:14). Paul writes of the law in the present tense. The law is "holy, and just, and good."

"The present tenses which commence at this point do not imply any change of subject, but are necessary because he [Paul] is now to treat the character of the law and the character necessarily remains unchanged. He could not say, 'The law was spiritual,' and so the present tenses are not to be regarded as expressive of his personal experiences, in view of the clear connection of what precedes."²

No one has any difficulty fitting Paul's life into chapters 6 and 8. There is no occasion for qualifying or modifying any part of them. And his statements in chapter 7 are just as positive as those in chapters 6 and 8, even if they seem to be contradictory. We must be careful to find his meaning in Romans 7, not to impose our own. Someone else could impose his as well. But that is not exegesis, that is eisegesis. When interpreters impose their own ideas upon a passage, no one learns from the Scripture. We must let Paul help us in this for we are sure it was not his intention to create a paradox in his presentation of truth.

We believe that Paul is still speaking as a representative of the human race generally, and the man under the law (the Jew) specifically. In verse 14 he says, "We know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, [fleshly] sold under sin." According to the whole New Testament this is not a Christian's normal life experience. Rather Paul is answering the question in verse 13: "Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid." Paul is raising questions and answering them for the benefit and enlightenment of all, using himself as the object, as we often do in our discussions.

Here is the contrast between the law and the Gospel for holiness. If we want to accord verse 14 to this holy apostle in his regenerate, sanctified state, then the Gospel is no more effective to deliver a man from his sins,

than is the law, and we have Paul still in his sins. None of us believes this about Paul.

"It is difficult to conceive how the opinion could have crept into the Church, or prevailed there, that the apostle speaks of his regenerate state: and that what was in such a state true of himself, must be true of all others in the same state. This opinion has most pitifully and most shamefully, not only lowered the standard of Christianity, but destroyed its influence and disgraced its character."³

Hear Paul's testimony. It is not: "For what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I" (verse 15). "How to perform that which is good I find not" (verse 18). "For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do" (v. 19). "... no more I that do it ... sin ... dwelleth in me" (v. 20). "But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members" (v. 23). "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (24). (Who ever heard anyone quote any of these verses for a Christian testimony?) It is rather: "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:25).

"Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ ..." (II Corinthians 2:14).

"But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Corinthians 15:57).

"Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost" (Romans 15:13).

Did you ever try to mix water and oil? Both are most useful, but they will not mix. Neither must we try to mingle two opposite themes in the Word of God. They will not blend.

Should it not be clear that the experience of the man in Romans 7 has no consonance with that of the man in Romans 6 and 8? The man in chapter 7 is in the flesh, under the law, sold under sin, has sin dwelling in him, does not do good, does evil, is wretched, is in captivity to the law of sin in his members. The man in chapter 6 is dead to sin, free from sin, baptized into Jesus Christ, not under the dominion of sin, walks in newness of life, is alive unto God through Jesus Christ, is not under the law, has fruit unto

holiness, and the end everlasting life. The man in chapter 8 experiences no condemnation, is free from the law of sin and death, is spiritually minded, is not in the flesh, has the Spirit of God--Christ indwelling him, has the Spirit bearing witness that he is a child of God, has the Spirit making intercession for him, has Christ making intercession for him, cannot be separated from the love of God, and is in Christ Jesus.

But some say that Paul did not always do what he wanted to, and sometimes did what he did not want to. But where do the Scriptures say that? Paul did not say it. Romans 7 is all positive language. His statements are absolute and cannot be reduced to relative ideas. When we make the absolutes in Romans 7, relatives, as is so often done, we only read our own ideas into the Scripture instead of reading the truth of the Spirit out of it.

Some say the expression, "I delight in the law of God after the inward man" (verse 22) cannot be the experience of an unregenerate man. Why not? The Scriptures show the opposite to be true. Were not the Jews, scribes, Pharisees, and priests so zealous for the law of God that they crucified Jesus? Did not Jesus say, "The scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do"? Jesus recognized their "delight" and authority in the law.

Paul was a "Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church ... righteousness ... in the law, blameless" (Philippians 3:5-6). But because he knew only the law, and not Christ, he persecuted Christ (Acts 9:4) and His church. He was lost. Yet he "delighted in the law of God after the inward man." But his "inward man" was lost with the outer man. He was unregenerated. Jesus told His apostles that those who will kill them, will think they are doing God service. So did Paul.

Romans 2:17-20 reads, "Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God, And knowest his will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law; And art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness, An instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, which hast the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law."

"Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; Whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh

Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen." (Romans 9:4,5).

Indeed, the Jews were entitled to reverence the law and delight in it, but not to refuse the Gospel. The Jews followed Paul from place to place, roused a rabble, and once stoned him and dragged him out of the city for dead. Many of the Christian Jews, influenced by the unbelieving Jews, said, "You must be circumcised and keep the law" to be saved and made constant difficulty for Paul in his churches. In fact, verse 22 in its context fits a Jew, not a Christian. The Christian speaks of the Gospel rather than the law. This point is here emphasized because verse 22 has been a stronghold for those who say Romans 7 represents the normal experience of a regenerate man. Let no one say that any more. The "I" in verse 22 is the same "I" as all the other "I's" in this chapter and they all represent the experience of the unregenerate man. That experience is somewhat similar to that of a defeated Christian. They do not represent the normal Christian experience.

"The first three centuries the entire Christian church with one accord applied it (Romans 7:13-25) solely to the unregenerate man ... Its application to the regenerate man was first invented by Augustine, who was followed by many eminent doctors of the Middle Ages. After the Reformation the interpretation of Augustine was largely adopted, especially by the followers of Calvin. At the present day [almost 100 years ago] the Church generally ... including some of the [best] commentators, have returned to the just interpretation as held by the primitive church."⁴

The Christian church never believed that Romans 7:13-25 described the experience of a regenerate man until the world-church corruption of the fourth century. At that time such a corrupt doctrine was needed by the church to save its public face because of the whole mass of pagan people of the Empire who were included in the church. The Reformers needed such a doctrine just as much because of the pagan people in their churches. Why should the whole New Testament doctrine of holiness be debased by a wrong interpretation of Romans 7 in accommodation to a corrupt church? Why not interpret Romans 7 by the whole New Testament if we want to arrive at the truth?

We ask this question with special emphasis because so many

commentators, expositors, and people generally regard this chapter as Paul's experience, somehow, in his regenerate state. Clarke, Whedon, Finney, H. Griffith Thomas, and Godet reject this interpretation.

From Romans 8:1 to 39 there is a perfect consonance between the grammar and the theology. Paul evidently resumes the discussion in Romans 8:1 which he had discontinued in 7:6. "... no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus ... For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death" (8:1,2). This is an absolute antithesis to Romans 7:23.

How could a man be a captive and free at the same time? How are two opposite experiences by the same "me" possible at the same time?

"Bringing me into captivity to the law of sin ... in my members." "... made me free from the law of sin and death."

"That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Romans 8:4). "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh [which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances--Hebrews 9:10], ... God ..." did through Christ (Romans 8:3). Jesus said "I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill" the law. The Bible does not say, "Christ fulfilled the law for us." It does say, "God justifies, or reckons righteousness to us because we believe in Christ" (Philippians 3:9; Romans 3:21-26). The Bible does not say, "Christ gives us His righteousness." But it does say, "That the [required] righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Romans 8:4).

What the law could not do in chapter 7, the grace of God could do in chapter 8. The difference between chapter 7 and chapter 8 is the same as between the Old and the New Testaments-law and grace, "the ministration of death" and "the ministration of the Spirit" (II Corinthians 3:7,8), condemnation and justification, death and life.

Romans 8:13-17 far exceeds the experience in chapter 7. In 8:26,27 the Holy Spirit makes intercession for us [when we pray] according to the will of God. In 8:34, Christ at the right hand of the Father also "maketh intercession for us." Such provision for the saints was not possible under the law, and was never heard of before. Prayer and trust are not even mentioned in chapter 7. There was no fellowship there with God or man.

When a Christian prays, three persons pray, two of whom are the Holy Spirit and Jesus. God has put Himself under a divine compulsion to hear and answer the saints when they pray.

Christ "is the express image of his [God's] person." To be conformed to the image of the Son, means also to be conformed to the image of God. Are we really being conformed to the image of God? We may say we're not living in Romans 7, but are we really meeting the challenge of Romans 8?

Christ became a man like we are, He was tempted like we are (without sin), He suffered like we do (only more), He died like we die, He was buried like we are, He arose from the dead and we also shall rise, He ascended to heaven and we shall also, He inherited all things and we are "joint heirs with him" v, 17. "The unsearchable riches of Christ" (Ephesians 3:8)! "Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matthew 13:43).

The Scriptures do not teach sinless perfection, so called. Neither do they teach sinful imperfection as did medieval Luther and humanist Zwingli. Luther said, "Ich bin zugleich krank und gesund; zugleich ein Sunder und ein gerechter." "I am at the same time sick and well; at the same time a sinner and a righteous one."⁵ Zwingli in his communion prayer said, "Father, grant unto us miserable sinners ... " ". . . that we are indeed miserable sinners . . ."⁶

This is as high as any of the Reformers ever came in Christian perfection. They left a Christian a sinner (including themselves) hoping in the grace of God to save them as perpetual sinners.

All of the Reformers were followers of Augustine.

He taught that Romans 7 portrays the experience of the regenerate man. Luther and Zwingli taught the same.⁷ This error lives on. The early Anabaptists did not believe this. But some of their descendants do, not because they have made a diligent and intelligent study of Romans 7 and related Scripture, but because they have not.

When once we can rescue New Testament teachings on holiness and ethics from the blight of the old medieval concepts of a man stumbling around in Romans 7 as the normal Christian experience, we will have made great strides toward New Testament sanctification in our pulpits, in

our Sunday schools, in our literature, and in the quality of life of our people. Let us shun as from the devil any interpretation of Scripture that makes Paul a defeated sinner (and all of us with him) rather than a victorious saint.

May the Word of God not be distorted nor contaminated as it passes through our minds and hands, nor be diminished as it is uttered by our lips or flows from our pens. Souls may live or die, depending on how we present God's Word to them.

1. Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament, Edward Robinson, D. D. LL. D. 1874.
2. Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans, W. H. Griffith Thomas, DD, p. 193. Used by permission.
3. Clarke's Commentary, Romans; Vol. 6, p. 86.
4. Whedon's Commentary of the New Testament, Vol III, p. 335.
5. The Concept of Grace in the Radical Reformation; Alvin J. Beachy, Doctor of Theology, in Luther's Bondage of the Will. Used by permission
6. Works of Zwingli, Jackson PP. 144-147.
7. Ditto.